The EXCLUSIONIST

A Tale of Garden Avenue

BY MARION HILL.

It was all the fault of a pinheaded philanthropist in the first place. Holding rampant ideas about the civilizing effect of flowers and plants upon the working classes, he had taken in hand a wretched alley of dwellings and had sown lawns, set out shade trees, planted flowers and had rechristened the frowsy thoroughfare Garden avenue. Then he died—and it was time.

Of course, in less than a year resolute hens and unfaltering goats had destroyed the grass, obliterating even its confines; children had pulled up the plants, leaving not even the holes which had held them; and the adults, with rare foresight, had guarded against winter scarcity of fuel by chopping down the shade trees, leaving not even the roots. The new name unfortunately remained.

Garden avenue was a world in itself. Almost every house bore the sign, "Lodgers Taken." The terrific number of these signs was outdone only by the more terrific number of streaky children tumbling about. The alley teemed with them. They were all of about the same age—that age when they seem happiest under the feet of something, horse or human. Apparently they belonged to no one. All day long they played about, falling off of things with howls and into things with splashes, without disturbing the serenity of a soul, in sight or out. Ah, the hordes of them!

Children and lodgers were the recreation of Garden avenue; its burden of sorrow was Miss Galloway's house.

Miss Galloway, of temper even more uncertain than her age, had kept her grass. He house was so clean that it virtually slapped the avenue in the face. She had sweet peas in her back yard and a geranium bush in her front yard, and she refused to harbor hens, goats or children in either. Also, she had a fat cat. The cat proper to the avenue was skinny, moth-eaten as to fur, tattered as to ears, was confined strictly to the fence tops, and was always in madly accelerated flight at that. Miss Galloway conformed to the vicinity solely in the circumstance of displaying the usual little encouragement—"Lodgers Taken."

"Ah, the long day that's been up," once viciously sighed a neighbor. She had come out upon her front step to shake a piece of rag carpet and Miss Galloway had come out upon her front step to shake a rug. Perhaps the rug hurt the feelings of the rag carpet. "I sh'd think you'd be takin' down that sign be now?"

"And why?" asked Miss Galloway, bitingly. She had shoved her spectacles up. She always did this when she needed to see.

"On account, sure, of its bein' unlikely you'll ever git a lodger to your taste. An' your room that pleasant, too."

"Why unlikely?" The glasses went a notch higher on her forehead. When they reached hair, war was always on.

"Well, Marn, you say you wunt take married folk—"

"Always quarreling. And they have children. I hate children. Won't tolerate them. Particularly on my back fence."

This shot was aimed directly at the neighbor, and hit; for among her other jewels that neighbor owned a small pair of blue jean pants (named Bartholomew), with sandy hair on one end and sandy feet on the other, and oftener than not the pants were dangling on Miss Galloway's forbidden fence, whence they were prone to tumble, head-end first, into Miss Galloway's sweet peas.

The mother of the blue jeans hurried with her arraignment—"and you wunt take single men—"

"Always going to bed drunk with their boots on the quilt."

"—nor single women—"

"Always ironing out shirt waists in your kitchen and having beaus in your parlor."

"Then what's left? Tell me that?"

"Widows!" Miss Galloway closed the discussion by banging her door.

"Of all th' quare divils she is," commented Mrs. Riordan mournfully, retreating with the rag carpet.

Faith in the ideal lodger went long unrewarded, but not forever so. Miss Galloway was visited one morning by a committee from the District Dorcas society.

"We should like to rent one of your vacant rooms," explained the spokeswoman.

"I've but the one."

"We should like to rent it, then."

"I'd like to, too, but I don't take married—"

"We have heard all about that from a Mrs. What's-her-name down the street, and we think we have a person who will be unobjectionable to you—"

—"people, because they quarrel; nor bachelors, because they drink; nor girls, because they think of nothing but flirting and fellers," continued Miss Galloway triumphantly. It would need more than three women to sidetrack her. "I take only widows."

"This is one—a Mrs. Smink."

"I don't like the name. It makes me think of skunk."

"Oh, how silly, Miss Galloway! It can do nothing of the kind! And a name makes no difference, anyway."

"Makes me think of skunk," repeated Miss Galloway, shoving her glasses pretty high. The two principals looked daggers at each other. A young and giddy slummer, a recent member of the committee, threw herself into the breach.

"Can't you think of skunk and rent your room, too?" she asked.

"Yes, miss, and be glad to."

"Well, for pity's sake, let's call this settled! You will take Mrs. Smink then?"

"One moment. Has this Mrs. Skunk (Smink) any children?"

"Oh, dear, no. Better if she had. She would be less lonely."

"I differ, Miss. She'd be lonelier. She'd have to stay in with them, while without them she can gad about and get comforted. Don't say children to me. Fussy, shrieking, smeary-mouthed nuisances! This Mrs. Skunk (Smink) ought to thank her stars for what she's missed."

"Fight it out between you," said the young slummer, cheerfully, "but be nice to her, Miss Galloway. We are going to bring her right here from the funeral."

"Whose funeral?"

"Her husband's. She's a very new widow indeed. And very sad. I'm sure she would like it if you had a cup of tea ready for her when she comes."

"I'm sure she would, too, miss, but I can't think of it. It would be a bad start. Ever after she would be wanting something hot for every pang that struck her."

"I am sorry you won't; but—a little bunch of sweet peas in her room—"

"Can't think of that either, miss. And it would only remind her of the dead. No, when I rent a room, the lodger lives her life and I live mine, separate and unsocial. Where there's no familiarity there's no frictions. We'll drop the sweet pea idea right here.

"Don't do anything you are not paid for," said the young woman indignantly. "But I wish you could see the room she is in now. You would not talk of 'sweet peas reminding her of the dead.' Why, there is not a bud or blossom in sight. They are so poor, and their friends, if they have any, are so poor—" Genuine emotion mastered her and she hid her face in her handkerchief. Miss Galloway got emotional, too, and asked anxiously:

"If this Mrs. Skunk (Smink) is as poor as you say, how am I to make sure of my rent?"

"We guarantee it. Mrs. Smink sews beautifully and has many patrons."

"I want a dollar a week."

"You'll get it," promised the committee, rising wearily as one.

"I'll need to," said Miss Galloway grimly, showing them to the door.

"Needn't think they can lord it over me just because they have lace on their petticoats," she muttered.

Before going indoors, she glanced at the houses on both sides of the street, noticing with ever new jealousy the ever old scene of general neighborliness in which she had no share. From the groups of babies in the gutter to the groups of women at washtubs in back yards, all but herself had comrades to idle with, cronies to talk to.

"Gossiping trollops!" she commented.

Her tone was bitter, but there was also heartache in it as she shut out the world and went back into her empty house. Yet at that very moment had a neighbor run in and attempted to be neighborly, Sally Galloway would have resented it so sincerely and agressively as to have discouraged further advances from that quarter for all time.

"And if Mrs. Skunk (Smink) thinks she rents my whole house for a dollar a week, I'll show her she's mistaken the moment she pokes her nose into my privacy," she muttered at the conclusion of her work of putting to rights the room intended for her widow. "And I'll pick every last flower from my garden and put them in my own room straight off." Which she did, with a quieting effect upon her nerves.

In the afternoon, when a carriage bowled along down the honored and delighted avenue, Miss Galloway was quite ready for it in a boarder-repelling gown of stiff alpaca. The carriage let out its one occupant, a black-robed, grief-stricken girl—not much more than a child—widowed at 17. She groped her way into the house and ran unasked into Miss Galloway's outraged, unready arms.

"Why, where's Mrs. Smink?" demanded the spinster. But she knew, and tried to shove away the hands which clung to her.

"Oh, Miss Galloway," sobbed the girl, pressing against Miss Sally's stony bosom, and there poured out her agony of loss; "it is so good of you to befriend me, to give me a home! Oh, how could I have gone back to the place they took him from, where he had laid three days dead, three days—"

"It's over. Don't harp on it," advised Miss Galloway, still nervously pushing at the young fingers. She objected to tears on her dress and on her carpet.

"—three days without a word to me, without a look, without a movement of his dear arms, so cold, so still—and we were always talking and laughing. Why couldn't I die, too?"

"You will if you go on like this. It does no good."

"We used to go everywhere together; why not down to death together? My only heaven was in the light of my dear one's eyes, and my only possible home was in his heart—and where is he now? In the dreadful earth!"

Miss Sally shivered. She, too, had once stood beside a new grave.

"There is a tree near him and it rustles all the time. He never could bear the sound of a tree rustling in the wind. He said it had a lonely sound. And now he'll have to listen to it forever and forever. He can't get out. Oh, I'm going back to him. I left him too soon. He will think, dead though he is, that I might have stayed a little longer. Do you hear me? Let go!"

Not tenderly, but instinctively, Miss Galloway tightened her hold.

"Be quiet," she gasped. "Stop carrying on. You'll make yourself sick. Let me show you to your room, Mrs. Smink."

"Don't call me that! Ever! He used to. In fun. My name is Esther. Call me that."

"All right. Now you quit crying. It's bad for you."

"But I want to die!" She was again clinging to her unresponsive companion.

"Not in my house—I'll have no such thing," fumed Miss Galloway, striving to free herself. "Better go to your room and lie down a bit."

"I'd rather stay with you," sobbed the girl.

"Of all the leeches!" muttered Miss Galloway in despairing recognition of the fact that sympathy was imperatively required of her. "Lie here then." She dumped her charge upon the lounge and patted her several times, woodenly, as if she were thumping a soft cushion. "Don't you budge one budge till I bring you a cup of tea."

Leaving the room, she muttered: "Since I've started at tea I might as well do the other thing, too," therefore she transferred the sweet peas to her lodger's bureau and strode on angrily to the kitchen.

In this fashion did Esther become a member of the Galloway establishment. As a lodger she proved desirable, for she minded her own business, was quiet and neat, and, by the Dorcas society, was kept supplied with so many patrons that she not only paid her rent, but began to put aside a little money. She persisted in loving Miss Sally as her truest, frankest friend. All that Miss Sally could do in return was merely to tolerate her—not much more—and even this toleration would not stand a strain, as Esther soon discovered. It was on the day that she found Bartholomew in the garden hanging on a fence nail (Miss Sally's side) and had brought him into the house to roll him upon the floor and generally to enjoy his babyship. Hearing his shrieks of anguished mirth, Miss Sally descended in a fury.

"Take that nuisance out of here," she commanded.

"S'e says oo's noosance," gurgled Esther in Bartholomew's tiny ear.

Miss Sally went white with anger and said shakingly:

"Is it possible you do not understand me?"

Esther looked up, frightened at the unmistakable hatred in her ladyship's face, and lost no time carrying Bartholomew to the door.

"I found him in the garden," she stammered, "and just brought him in for a frolic. He looked like a bit of sunshine."

"Then put him where sunshine belongs—outdoors," said Miss Galloway grimly, regaining her composure.

This incident troubled Esther, and she brooded over it until Sally Galloway felt forced to justify herself.

"All my life I've been the victim of children and their selfishness," she burst out suddenly. "A child—that is, the bearing of one—cost my mother her life. My childhood was squandered in tending the thankless brood she left; then my father married again; the second batch of squallers eventually drove us first ones from home to earn our living. I became a nursery maid. It was all I knew. My girlhood went as my childhood did—wasted—stunted—crushed! I saved a little money. Now that I am old they keep on badgering me! Do you wonder that I hate them?"

"Poor Miss Sally," whispered Esther, slipping away to her own room and her sewing.

In the evening Miss Sally joined her there and they sewed together in their usual silence. Miss Sally's one weakness was a love for sewing, and she took it as a privilege to be allowed to help on the exquisite materials that Esther had intrusted to her. Sometimes she went further with her help, and when an order was completed would say, "Now, let's take them where they belong," and side by side the odd pair of friends would trudge on the errand. Esther took these journeys always at night and the money she received she hoarded jealously. Curiosity got the better of Miss Sally's reserve.

"Saving to buy yourself new gowns?"

"No."

"You ought. This old black wrapper of yours is not much for looks."

"No."

The girl radiated a suggestion of stubbornness which but inflamed her questioner's ingenuity.

"If it's a monniment to your husband you're going to raise, I call it sheer extravagance. He's got a neat headstun a'ready."

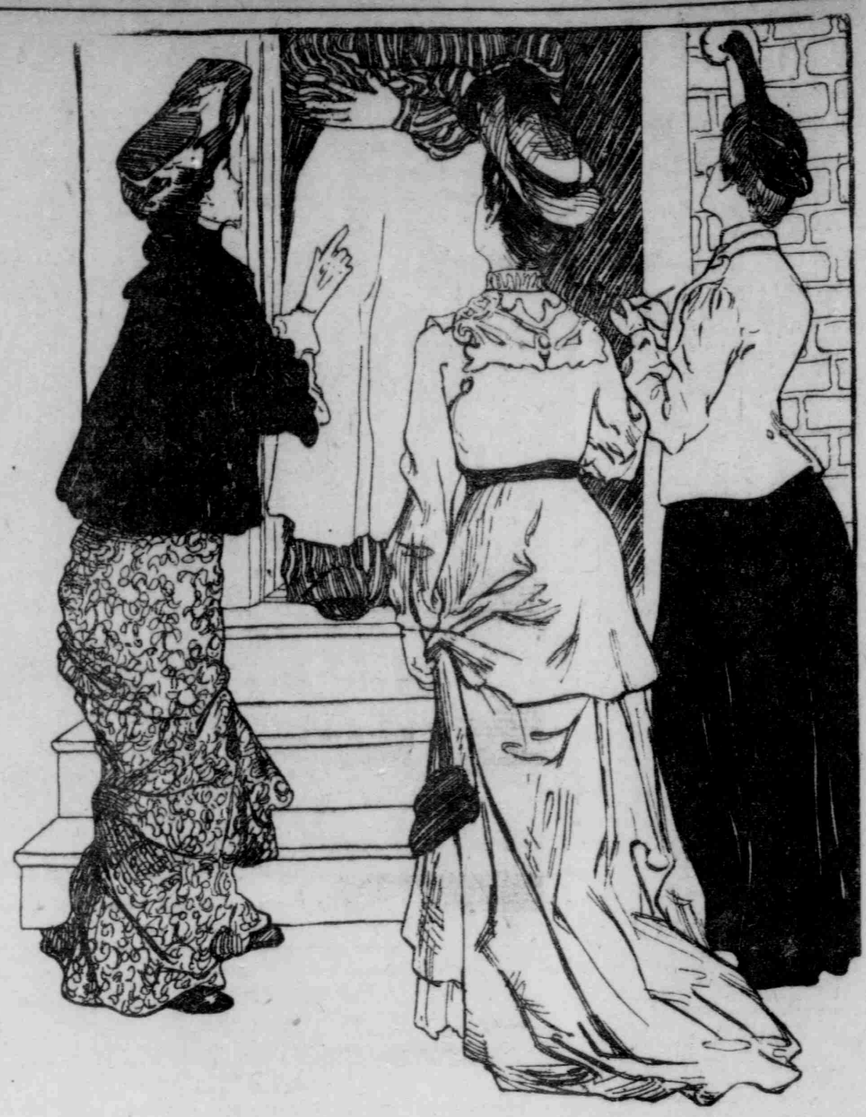
The girl lifted a radiant face.

"It is a monument to my husband I intend to raise, if the good God will let me."

Shocked at the irreverent introduction of a holy name, Miss Sally lapsed back into discreet silence. It was broken by Esther, who presently went into an irrepressible fit of quiet laughter.

"What's funny about a monniment?" asked Miss Sally, severely shoving up her glasses.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," said the girl, sobering at once. "I was just thinking of something else."



A Committee from the District Dorcas Society.

"Might as well out with it after such a to-do."

"I was thinking that I won't get any help from you on my next order."

"Why not?"

"You'll see." And the incomprehensible mirth came on again.

"Don't try to be more of a fool than you are. Let's take these things where they belong."

Esther obediently put on her hat and the two started out, but not before Miss Sally had set their chairs primly back against the wall. It might be Esther's room, but it was Miss Sally's house, and in that house unswervable, awful tidiness reigned. Its orderliness was tomblike.

"I can't draw an easy breath if so much as a pin's awry," she would say; and it was easily believable. If ever a woman was cursed with neatness it was Sally Galloway. She was too neat to be affectionate—affection, properly demonstrated, is apt to disorder the hair and make an apron set "wapple-jawed." She did not believe that "cleanliness was next to godliness." She turned the words around.

Her one objection to sewing was its temporary "messiness." Perhaps that is why she went to Esther's room instead of inviting Esther to hers for their nightly industry.

"Is this the order that I won't help you on?" she soon had occasion to ask.

"This is it."

"What's that scrap in your hand?"

"A sleeve."

"Great king. Doll's clothes?"

"You may call them so if you like," and Esther laughed; "but, no, Miss Sally, it's a baby's layette."

"And do you really think that because I detest nasty, meddling infants, I won't admire to sew on such soft white goods as this? Pshaw. Give me a needle."

She enjoyed the work immensely.

"I never had a childhood and never had a doll, Esther," she said one evening while the tiny garments progressed, "and do you know what I am thinking as I sew? I pretend I am a child and sewing for my big, blue-eyed wax doll. Oh, how I wanted one! How I wanted one!"

Her voice was rapturously sad and gentle, and quick tears sprang to Esther's eyes. She put out her small hand and stroked Miss Sally's horny one.

"What are you pawing for?" Miss Sally jerked her hand out of reach and scratched the offending place.

But she became all tenderness again as she hemmed tiny ruffles or fashioned wee buttonholes. The work lasted for weeks.

"Esther, wouldn't you kind of like to see these things when they are put on? Don't you think a little face right here and little hands right here would look sort of cunning?"

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